

THE HILLMAN

An Unusual Love Story

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

CHAPTER XXI—Continued.

"My own reputation," she murmured, "is absolutely of no consequence, but remember that you live here, and—"

"Don't be silly!" he interrupted. "What does that matter? And besides, according to you and all the rest of you here, these things don't affect a man's reputation—they are expected of him. See, I have rung the bell for breakfast. Now I am going to telephone down for a messenger boy to go for your clothes."

They breakfasted together, a little later, and she made him smoke. He stood before the window, looking down upon the river, with his pipe in his mouth and an unfamiliar look upon his face.

"Do you suppose that Louise knows anything?" he asked at length.

"I should think not," she replied. "It is for you to tell her. I rang up the prince's house while you were in the bathroom. They say that he has a broken rib and some bad cuts, sustained in a motor accident last night, but that he is in no danger. There was nothing about the affair in the newspapers, and the prince's servants have evidently been instructed to give this account to inquirers."

A gleam of interest shone in John's face.

"By the bye," he remarked, "the prince is a Frenchman. He will very likely expect me to fight with him."

"No hope of that, my belligerent friend," Sophie declared, with an attempt at a smile. "The prince knows that he is in England. He would not be guilty of such an anachronism. Besides, he is a person of wonderfully well-balanced mind. When he is himself again, he will realize that what happened to him is exactly what he asked for."

John took up his hat and gloves. He glanced at the clock—it was a little past eleven.

"I am ready," he announced. "Let me drive you home first."

His motor was waiting at the door, and he left Sophie at her rooms. Before she got out, she held his arm for a moment.

"John," she said, "remember that Louise is very high-strung and very sensitive. Be careful!"

"There is only one thing to do on my way," he answered. "There is only one way in which I can do it."

He drove the car down Piccadilly like a man in a dream, steering as carefully as usual through the traffic, and glancing every now and then with unseeing eyes at the streams of people upon the pavements. Finally he came to a standstill before Louise's house and stopped the engine with deliberate care. Then he rang the bell, and was shown into her little drawing-room, which seemed to have become a perfect bower of pink and white lilac.

He sat waiting as if in a dream, unable to decide upon his words, unable even to sift his thoughts. The one purpose with which he had come, the one question he designed to ask, was burning in his brain. The minutes of his absence seemed tragically long.

Then at last the door opened and Louise entered. She came toward him with a little welcoming smile upon her lips. Her manner was gay, almost affectionate.

"Have you come to take me for a ride before lunch?" she asked. "Do you know, I think that I should really like it! We might lunch at Ranelagh on our way home."

The words stuck in his throat. From where she was, she saw now the writing on his face. She stopped short.

"What is it?" she exclaimed.

"Ever since I knew you," he said slowly, "there have been odd moments when I have lived in torture. During the last fortnight, those moments have become hours. Last night the end came."

"Are you mad, John?" she demanded.

"Perhaps," he replied. "Listen. When I left you last night, I went to the club in Adelphi Terrace. There was a well-known critic there, comparing you and Latrobe. On the whole he favored you, but he gave Latrobe the first place in certain parts. Latrobe, he said, had had more experience in life. She had had a dozen lovers—you, only one!"

She winced. The glad freshness seemed suddenly to fade from her face. Her eyes became strained.

"Well?"

"I found Gratiot. I cornered him. I asked him for the truth about you. He put me off with an evasion. I came down here and looked at your window. It was three o'clock in the morning. I dared not come in. A very demon of unrest was in my blood. I stopped at the night club on my way back. Sophie was there. I asked her plainly to put me out of my agony. She was like Gratiot. She fended with me. And then—the prince came!"

"The prince was there?" she faltered.

"He came up to the table where Sophie and I were sitting. I think I was half dead. I poured him a glass of wine. I told him that you had given

me to become my wife. He raised his glass—I can see him now. He told me, with a smile, that it was the anniversary of the day on which you promised to become his—"

Louise shrank back.

"He told you that?"

John was on his feet. The fever was blazing once more.

"He told me that, face to face?"

"And you?"

John answered simply, "I should have killed him. I drove the words down his throat. I threw him back to the place he had left, and hurt him rather badly. I'm afraid. Sophie took me home somehow, and now I am here."

She leaned a little forward on the couch. She looked into his face searchingly, anxiously, as if looking for something she could not find. His lips were set in hard, cold lines. The likeness to Stephen had never been more apparent.

"Listen!" she said. "You are a Puritan. While I admire the splendid self-restraint evolved from your creed, it is partly temperamental, isn't it? I was brought up to see things differently, and I do see them differently. Tell me, do you love me?"

"Love you?" he repeated. "You know it! Could I suffer the tortures of the damned if I didn't? Could I come to you with a man's blood upon my hands if I didn't? If the prince lives, it is simply the accident of fate. I tell you that if we had been alone I should have driven the breath out of his body. Love you?"

He rose slowly to his feet. She leaned with her elbow upon the mantelpiece, and her face was hidden for a moment.

"Let me think!" she said. "I don't know what to say to you. I don't know you, John. There isn't anything left of the John I loved. Let me look again!"

She swung around.

"You speak of love," she went on suddenly. "Do you know what it is? Do you know that love reaches to the heavens and can also touch the nethermost depths of hell? If I throw myself on your knees before you now, if I link my fingers around your neck, if I whisper to you that in the days that were past before you came I had done things I would fain forget, if I told you that from henceforth every second of my life was yours, that my heart beat with yours by day and by night, that I had no other thought, no other dream, than to stay by your side, to see you happy, to give all there was of myself into your keeping, to keep it holy and sacred for you—John, what then?"

Never a line in his face softened. He looked at her a moment as he had looked at the woman in Piccadilly, into whose hand he had dropped gold.

"Are you going to tell me that it is the truth?" he asked hoarsely.

"Think for a single moment of that feeling which you call love, John!" she pleaded. "Listen! I love you. It has come to me at last, after all these

years. It lives in my heart, a greater thing than my ambition, a greater thing than my success, a greater thing than life itself. I love you, John! Can't you feel, don't you know, that nothing else in life can matter?"

Not a line in his face softened. His teeth had come together. He was like a man upon the rack.

"It is true? It is true, then?" he demanded.

She looked at him without any reply. The seconds seemed drawn out to an interminable period. He heard the rolling of the motorbuses in the street. Once more the perfume of the lilac seemed to choke him. Then she leaned back and touched the bell.

"The prince waits the truth," she said. "I think you had better go."

CHAPTER XXII.

Before the wide-gang window of her little bedroom, Sophie Gerard was crouching with her face turned westward. She had abandoned all effort to sleep. The one thought that was

beating in her brain was too insistent, too clamorous. Somewhere beyond that tangled mass of chimneys and telegraph poles, somewhere on the other side of the gray haze which hung about the myriad roofs, John and Louise were working out their destiny, speaking at last the naked truth to each other.

She started suddenly back into the room. There was a knocking at the door, something quite different from her landlady's summons. She wrapped her dressing-gown around her, pulled the curtains around the little bed on which she had striven to rest, and moved toward the door. She turned the handle softly.

"Who is that?" she asked.

John almost pushed his way past her. She closed the door with nervous fingers. Her eyes sought his face, her lips were parted. She clung to the back of the chair.

"You have seen Louise?" she exclaimed breathlessly.

"I have seen Louise," he answered. "It is all over!"

She looked a little helplessly around her. Then she selected the one chair in the tiny apartment that was likely to hold him, and led him to it.

"Please sit down," she begged, "and tell me about it. You mustn't despair like this all at once. I wonder if I could help!"

"No one can help," he told her grimly. "It is all finished and done with. I would rather not talk any more about it. I didn't come here to talk about it. I came to see you. So this is where you live!"

He looked around him, and for a moment he almost forgot the pain which was gnawing at his heart. It was such a simple, plainly furnished little room, so clean, so neat, so pathetically eloquent of poverty. She drew closer together the curtains which concealed the little chintz-covered bed, and came and sat down by his side.

She clasped her hands tighter around his arm. Her eyes sought his anxiously.

"But you mustn't climb down, John," she insisted. "You are so much nicer where you are, so much too good for the silly, ugly things. You must fight this in your own way, fight it according to your own standards. You are too good to come down."

"Ah! too good for you, Sophie?"

She looked at him, and her whole face seemed to soften. The light in her blue eyes was sweet and wistful. A bewildering little smile curled her lips.

"Don't be stupid!" she begged. "A few minutes ago I was looking out of my window and thinking what a poor little morsel of humanity I am, and what a useless, drifting life I have led. But that's foolish. Come now! What I want to persuade you to do is to go back to Cumberland for a time, and try hard—very hard indeed—to realize what it means to be a woman like Louise, with her temperament, her intense intellectual curiosity, her charm. Nothing could make Louise different from what she is—a dear, sweet woman and a great artist. And John, I believe she loves you!"

His face remained undisturbed even by the flicker of an eyelid.

"Sophie," he said, "I have decided to go abroad. Will you come with me?"

She sat quite still. Again her face was momentarily transformed. All its pallor and fatigue seemed to have vanished. Her head had fallen a little back. She was looking through the ceiling into heaven. Then the light died away almost as quickly as it had come. Her lips shook tremulously.

"You know you don't mean it, John! You wouldn't take me. And if you did, you'd hate me afterward—you'd want to send me back!"

He suddenly drew her to him, his arm went around her waist. She had lost all power of resistance. For the first time in his life of his own deliberate accord, he kissed her—feverishly, almost roughly.

"Sophie," he declared, "I have been a fool! I have come an awful cropper, but you might help me with what's left. I am going to start abroad. I am going to get rid of some of these ideas of mine which have brought me nothing but misery and disappointment. I don't want to live up to them any longer. I want to just forget them. I want to live as other men live—just the simple, ordinary life. Come with me! I'll take you to the places we've talked about together. I am always happy and contented with you. Let's try it!"

Her arms stole around his neck.

"John," she whispered, hiding her face for a moment. "What can I say? What could any poor, weak little creature like me say? You know I am fond of you—I haven't had the pride, even, to conceal it!"

He stood up, held her face for a moment between his hands, and kissed her forehead.

"Then that's all settled," he declared. "I am going back to my room now. I want you to come and stay with me there tonight, at eight o'clock."

Her eyes sought his, pleaded with them, searched them.

"You are sure, John?" she asked, her

voice a little broken. "You want me really? I am to come?"

"I am sure," he answered steadfastly. "I shall expect you at eight o'clock!"

John went back to his rooms fighting all the time against a sense of unreality, a sense almost of lost identity. He bought an evening newspaper and read it on the way. He talked to the hall porter, he talked to a neighbor with whom he ascended in the lift—he did everything except think.

In his rooms he telephoned to the restaurant for a waiter, and with the men in his hand, a few minutes later, he ordered dinner. Then he glanced at his watch—it was barely seven o'clock. He went down to the barber shop, was shaved and had his hair cut, encouraging the barber all the while to talk to him. He gave his hands over to a manicure, and did his best to talk nonsense to her. Then he came upstairs again, changed his clothes with great care, and went into his little sitting room.

It was five minutes to eight, and dinner had been laid at a little round table in the center of the room. There was a bowl of pink roses—Sophy's favorite flower—sent in from the florist; the table was lighted by a pink-shaded lamp. John went around the room, turned the other lights up till the apartment was hung with shadows save for the little spot of color in the middle. An unopened bottle of champagne stood in an ice-pail, and two specially prepared cocktails had been placed upon the little side table. There were no more preparations to be made.

He turned impatiently away from the window and glanced at the clock. It was almost eight. He tried to imagine that the bell was ringing, that Sophie was standing there on the threshold in her simple but dainty evening dress, with a little smile parting her lips. The end of it all! He pulled down the blind. No more of the window, no more looking out at the lights, no more living in the clouds! It was time, indeed, that he lived as other men. He lifted one of the glasses to his lips and drained its contents.

Then the bell rang. He moved forward to answer its summons with beating heart. As he opened it, he received a shock. A messenger boy stood outside. He took the note which the boy handed him and tore it open under a lamp. There were only a few lines:

John, my heart is breaking, but I know you do not mean what you said. I know it was only a moment of madness with you. I know you will love Louise all your life, and will bless me all your life. I am giving up the one thing which could make my life a paradise. I shall be in the train when you read this, on my way to Bath. I have wired my young man, as you call him, to meet me. I am going to ask him to marry me, if he will, next week.

Good-by! I give you no advice. Some day I think that life will right itself with you.

THE LETTER DROPPED upon the table. John stood for a moment dazed. Suddenly he began to laugh. Then he remembered the messenger boy, gave him half a crown, and closed the door. He came back into the room and took his place at the table. He looked at the empty chair by his side, looked at the full glass on the sideboard. It seemed to him that he was past all sensations. The waiter came in silently.

"You can serve the dinner," John ordered, shaking out his napkin. "Open the champagne before you go."

"You will be alone, sir?" the man inquired.

"I shall be alone," John answered.

CHAPTER XXIII.

It was a room of silence, save for the hissing of the green logs that burned on the open hearth, and for the slow movements of Jennings as he cleared the table. Straight and grim in his chair, with the newspaper by his side, Stephen Strangeway sat smoking stolidly. Opposite to him, almost as grim, equally silent, sat John.

"Things were quiet at Market Kettontoday, then, John?" Stephen asked at last.

"There was nothing doing," was the brief reply.

That, for the space of a quarter of an hour or so, was the sole attempt at conversation between the two brothers. Then Jennings appeared with a decanter of wine and two glasses, which he reverently filled. Stephen held his up to the light and looked at it critically. John's remained by his side, unnoticed.

"A glass for yourself, Jennings," Stephen ordered.

"I thank you kindly, sir," the old man replied.

He fetched a glass from the sideboard, filled it, and held it respectfully before him.

"It's the old toast," Stephen said gleefully. "You know it?"

"Aye, Master Stephen," the servant answered. "We've drunk it together for many a long year. I give it to you now with all my heart—confusion to all women!"

They both glanced at John, who

showed no signs of movement. Then they drank together, the older man and his servant. Still John never moved. Jennings drained his glass, placed the decanter by his master's side, and withdrew.

"So the poison's still there, brother?" Stephen asked.

"And will be so long as I live," John confessed gloomily. "For all that, I'll not drink your toast."

"Why not?"

"There was a little girl—you saw her when you were in London. She is married now, but I think of her sometimes; and when I do, you and old Jennings seem to me like a couple of blithering idiots cursing things too wonderful for you to understand!"

Stephen made no protest. For a time he smoked in silence. Curiously enough, as they sat together, some of the grim fierceness seemed to have passed from his expression and settled upon John. More than once, as he looked across at his younger brother, it almost seemed as if there was something of self-reproach in his questioning look.

"You dined at the ordinary in Market Kettontoday?" Stephen asked at last.

"I did."

"Then you heard the news?"

"Who could help it?" John muttered. "There wasn't much else talked about."

"Balliff Henderson has been over here," Stephen went on. "There's a small army of painters and decorators coming down to the castle next week. You saw the announcement of the wedding in the morning Post, maybe?"

John assented without words. Stephen smoked vigorously for a few moments. Every now and then he glanced across to where John was sitting. Once again the uneasiness which in his eyes, an uneasiness which was almost self-reproach.

John moved a little restlessly in his chair.

"Let's drop it, Stephen," he begged. "We both know the facts. She is going to marry him, and that's the end of it. Fill your glass up again. Here's mine untouched. I'll drink your toast with you, if you'll leave out the little girl who was kind to me. I'll give it to you myself—confusion to all women!"

"Confusion to—" Stephen began.

"What on earth is that?"

They both heard it at the same time—the faint beating of a motor engine in the distance. John set down his glass. There was a strange look in his eyes.

"There are more cars passing along the road now than in the old days," he muttered; "but that's a queer sound. It reminds one—good heavens, how it reminds one!"

There was a look of agony in his face for a moment. Then once more he raised his glass to his lips.

"It's passed out of hearing," Stephen said. "It's someone on the way to the castle, maybe."

Still their glasses remained suspended in midair. The little garden gate had opened and closed with a click; there were footsteps upon the flinty walk.

"It's someone coming here!" John cried hoarsely. "Why can't they keep away? It's two years ago this week since I brought her up the drive and you met us at the front door. Two years ago, Stephen! Who can it be?"

They heard the front door open. Their heads Jennings' voice raised in unusual and indignant protest. Then their own door was suddenly flung wide, and a miracle happened. John's glass slipped from his fingers, and the wine streamed out across the carpet. He shrank back, gripping at the tablecloth. Stephen turned his head, and sat as if turned to stone.

"John," he faltered, "it isn't the car this time—it is I who have broken down! I cannot go on. I have no pride left. I have come to you. Will you help me?"

He found himself upon his feet. Stephen, too, had risen. She stood between the two men, and glanced from one to the other. Then she looked more closely into John's face, peering forward with a little start of pain, and her eyes were filled with tears.

"John," she cried, "forgive me! You were so cruel that morning, and you seemed to understand so little. Don't you really understand, even now? Have you ever known the truth, I wonder?"

"The truth?" he echoed hoarsely. "Don't we all know that? Don't we all know that he is to give you your rights, that you are coming?"

"Stop!" she ordered him.

He obeyed, and for a moment there was silence—a tense, strained silence.

"John," she continued at last, "I have no rights to receive from the grace of St. Mary. He owes me nothing. Listen! Always we have seen him differently, you and I. To me there is only one great thing, and that is love; and beyond that nothing counts. I tried to love the prince before you came, and I thought I did, and I pretended that he loved me, and I loved him, and that he loved me and that I loved him,

and that if so it was his right. Look down the road, John! On that night I was on my way to the castle; but I broke down, and in the morning the world was all different, and I went back to London. It has been different ever since, and there has never been any question of anything between the prince and me, because I knew that it was not love."

John was shaking in every limb. His eyes were filled with fierce questioning. Stephen sat there, and there was wonder in his face, too.

"When you came to me that morning," she went on, "you spoke to me in a strange tongue. I couldn't understand you, you seemed so far away."

"I wanted to tell you the whole truth, but I didn't. Perhaps I wasn't sure—perhaps it seemed to me that it was best for me to forget, if ever I had cared, for the ways of our lives seemed so far apart. You went away, and I drifted on; but it wasn't true that I ever promised to marry the prince. No one had any right to put that paragraph in the newspaper!"

"But what are you doing here, then?" John asked hoarsely. "Aren't you on your way to the castle?"

She came a little nearer; her arms went around his neck.

"You dear stupid!" she cried. "Haven't I told you? I've tried to do without you, and I can't. I've come for you. Come outside, please! It's quite light. The moon's coming over the hills. I want to walk up the orchard. I want to hear just what I've come to hear!"

He passed out of the room in a dream, under the blossom-laden boughs of the orchard, and up the hillside toward the church. The dream passed, but Louise remained, flesh and blood. Her lips were warm and her arms held him almost feverishly.

"In that little church, John, and quickly—so quickly, please!" she whispered.

Jennings hastened to where Stephen was sitting alone.

"Mr. Stephen," he cried, "what's coming to us? There's that French hussy outside, and a motor on the drive, and the chauffeur's asking where he's to sleep. The woman wants to know whether she can have the same bedroom for her mistress as last time!"

"Then why don't you go and see about it, you old fool?" Stephen replied. "Pick up those pieces of glass there, lay the cloth, and get some supper ready."

Through the open doorway they heard Alene's voice in the hall.

"Master Jennings, will you please come and help me with the luggage?"

"Get along with you!" Stephen ordered. "You'd better hurry up with the supper, too. The boy Tom can see to the luggage."

The old man recovered himself slowly.

"You're taking 'em in, sir—taking 'em into the house?" he gasped. "What about that toast?"

Stephen refilled two glasses.

"We'd better alter it a little," he declared. "Here's confusion to most women, but luck to John and his wife!"

"Mr. John and his wife!" Jennings repeated, as he set his glass down empty. "I'll just see what them sheets is stirred upkins, sir, or that hussy will be making eyes at Tom!"

He departed, and Stephen was left alone. He sat and listened to the sound of luggage being taken upstairs, to Alene's little burst of directions, good-humored but profane, to the sound of preparations in the kitchen. In the room the tall clock ticked solemnly; a fragment of the log every now and then fell upon the hearth.

Presently he rose to his feet. He heard the click of the garden gate, the sound of John and Louise returning. He rose and stood ready to welcome them.

THE END.



"I've Come for You!"

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